tutes to the dominant world history narrative. She advocates a thematic approach to world history and provides a thumbnail sketch of what a global of history of jazz might look like. She contends that this unconventional approach would make Latin America more prominent: “Jazz is a good example of a thematic world history that respects Latin America because so much of the musical exchange provoking and fueling the developments we now call jazz took place south of the Rio Grande and along the border zones within the United States proper.”22 Steven Topik’s teaching Grande and along the border zones within the United States proper.”22 Steven Topik’s teaching and scholarship on the global history of coffee is an example of the thematic approach that Seigel advocates.23

Articles in this edition of WHB also make Latin America more prominent by utilizing a strategy that is the antithesis of creating totally new narratives in world history. Ben Leeming’s provocative piece on the ancient Americas is the most clear-cut example of this alternative approach, which is the third type of decentering mentioned above. Leeming does not advocate creating a novel story, but rather making Latin America more prominent in the traditional one. He proposes including Peru “as the location of a fifth early complex society alongside those of Sumner, Egypt, Harappa, and China.” Currently the Peruvian site is overlooked, as Leeming’s review of leading world history textbooks clearly indicates. Leeming’s case for including the Peruvian site revolves around queries about the timing and nature of Peruvian societies: when did Peruvian early societies form and how complex were they? He makes a compelling case for including Peru as the fifth early complex society, which is based on an informative discussion of recent research by experts in the field. Rick Warner’s short but stimulating essay also makes a strong argument for giving Latin America more visibility in the traditional world history narrative. Warner’s topic is important cities in transnational exchange. He laments that “Panama City rarely makes the list of cosmopolitan stopovers in the first half of our modern world history surveys.” He makes his case for including Panama based on the city’s significant role in the transatlantic silver trade. Along with making Panama an important site in the international economy, silver attracted a colorful cast of cosmopolitan characters — among them pirates — to the city. Recent scholarship published in other places also enhances Latin America’s place in world history by giving the region a more prominent place in a typical narrative. Work by Carlos Marichal on international debt and finance is a case in point. One of his earlier studies showed that while nineteenth century global financial crises usually originated in Europe, at times they started in Latin America (specifically Argentina).24 In a more recent study of colonial international finances he elevated New Spain to the level of “sub-empire” within the Spanish colonial system since much of Spain’s overseas expansion into the Spanish Caribbean was financed with Mexican silver.25 Jaime Rodriguez’s work on Latin American independence also bolsters the importance of the region by showing the resilience of political democracy.26 Finally, Kenneth Pomeranz’s The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy elevates Latin America’s importance by underscoring the importance of the region to Europe’s Industrial Revolution.27

Richard Weiner
Indiana University-Purdue University Fort Wayne

1 Hispanic American Historical Review 84:3 (August, 2004).
8 Ibid., 398.
12 This is my definition of decentering. The decentering endeavor that Adelman and his co-authors engaged in was more specific than this. Adelman, “Latin America and World Histories,” 407.
14 For an excellent essay that questions the novelty of globalization see Michael Lang, “Globalization and its History,” The Journal of Modern History (December 2006) 78:4 [forthcoming].
16 For a sophisticated classic in this genre see Fernando Henrique Cardoso and Enzo Faletto, Dependency and Development in Latin America (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).
18 Besse, “Placing Latin America in Modern World History Textbooks,” 413-414.
21 Even though Haber’s focus is not helpful for elevating Latin America’s place in world history I still think it is very useful. The questions he poses were also articulated by 19th century Latin American intellectuals: why are we behind? For studies that examine the ways 19th and 20th century Mexicans wrestled with this question see Richard Weiner, “Economic Thought and Culture in Revolutionary Mexico: Carlos Diaz Duabo’s Critique of the Humboldtian Narrative of Mexico’s Legendary Wealth,” Historia e Economia (Fall, 2006) [forthcoming]; and Richard Weiner, “El declive economico de Mexico en el siglo XIX: una perspectiva cultural,” Signos Historicos 12(7/December, 2004): 68-93.

Cooking a Cuban Ajiaco: The Columbian Exchange in a Stewpot

Gregory T. Cushman
University of Kansas

[Ajiaco] is a multiethnic stew popular in many parts of Latin America and the Caribbean. The Cuban version of this highly-adaptable dish dates back to the sixteenth century. From the beginning, it mixed meats, vegetables, and condiments originating from all over the world. Cuban ajiaco provides an ideal vehicle for illustrating the geographical patterns and historical processes of the Columbian exchange: the global interchange of animals, plants, and microbes between the Old and New Worlds in the wake of the Columbian voyages of the late
fifteenth century. It is particularly suitable for emphasizing the influence of Africans in this process and for correcting Alfred Crosby’s ethnocentric presentation of ecological imperialism as “the biological expansion of Europe.”1 Ajíaco also played a significant role in twentieth-century discussions of Cuban national identity. But unlike highland Colombia’s version of the ajíaco (based on chicken and potatoes) and the Dominican Republic’s sancocho (virtually identical to Cuban ajíaco), this simple, working-class dish — typically served to agricultural laborers at the main, midday meal — has never achieved a high status in Cuba’s national cuisine. This fact reveals the sort of prejudices that go into the “invention of tradition.”2

Thanks to the accelerating globalization of our food supply, the varied (and variable) ingredients of a Cuban ajíaco are readily available in the United States, not only in traditional centers of Caribbean immigration like New York and Miami, but also in an ever-increasing number of “heartland” cities with Hispanic immigrant enclaves. For example, in the northern suburbs of Nashville, Tennessee, where I grew up, I can now purchase all the ingredients for a Cuban ajíaco at a large, but otherwise unexceptional supermarket located just down the street from President Andrew Jackson’s former plantation home. Cooking an ajíaco only requires the most basic of cooking skills: peeling, cutting, chopping, boiling, and stirring. Even novice cooks can produce a good ajíaco. It is also highly suitable for hands-on, interactive teaching and can be adapted to a wide-range of classroom settings (for example, I have cooked stews for a third-grade bilingual classroom and for my university-level course in world environmental history). Therefore, I have organized the following history of the ajíaco in the form of a recipe. Its ingredients can be shown to, fed to, or (with some prior, time-saving or safety-conscious preparation) cooked by a class.

The following recipe for ajíaco criollo derives from three sources, themselves representative of Cuba’s recent history:

1. A 1960s cookbook compiled by home economist Nitza Villapol, “A Cuban Julia Child of sorts.” She starred for years in the TV show Cocina al minuto (Cooking to Order) and converted from a pre-revolutionary shill for U.S. consumer goods into a post-revolutionary activist responsible for teaching Cuban homemakers how to put a cheerful face on shortages.3 This book is widely available in English translation — although often under different “authorship” — thanks to a shameful tendency among some Cuban exiles to appropriate trademarks and intellectual property without permission as recompense for property lost since the 1959 Cuban Revolution.4

2. A nostalgic cookbook compiled by Cuban exile Mary Urrutia Randelman that recalls her “joyous, hopeful, and privileged life” as a child in “prosperous postwar Cuba.” Its excellent recipes are far better adapted to North American ingredients and tastes, and its autobiographical vignettes to ruling-class sensibilities: “Papitas del Yacht Club: more like manna than potato chips, . . . were the favorite of children and adults at the Havana Yacht Club.”5

3. Ample experience and conversation in the kitchens of my wife’s family, on both sides of the Florida Strait. This oral tradition is rooted in the countryside and cities of Holguín province in eastern Cuba, and it provides a corrective to the tendency of histories of cuisine to rely heavily on cookbooks authored for a bourgeois audience. (Perhaps most importantly, the ajíacos I have cooked based on this training have met with enthusiastic approval from Cuban nationals.)

Besides explaining how to prepare each ingredient for an ajíaco, I will also trace a likely path for most of its ingredients from their initial domestication in ancient times to their place in the modern Cuban diaspora.6 Ideally, to provide a hands-on spatial activity, teachers should provide students with a series of blank world maps and have them draw these routes for each ingredient. The following interpretation portrays the Columbian exchange as one, relatively late phase of a long, global history of crop and animal exchanges. It also makes clear that the Columbian exchange has never really ended — and that even the most traditional dishes are capable of change over time as societies adapt to new circumstances.

**Carnes (meats)**

Cut ½ pound of tasajo (salt-dried beef) into 3-4 large pieces and soak overnight in a large bowl; throw away the water when finished. Place the tasajo and ½ chicken in a large stewpot (cacerola), cover with plenty of water, bring to a boil, then simmer for approximately 1 hour. Add 1 lb. of flank steak (falta) or stew meat (carne de res), 1 lb. of pork (carne de puerco), 1 lb. of pork trotters (agujas de puerco) and boil for an additional 1 hour; skim off any scum that develops. If the pork pieces are fatty, skim off some of the lard to prepare the sofrito (see below). Equivalent portions of beef and beef short ribs, or chicken can be substituted for the pork.

The cow (Bos taurus) and pig (Sus scrofa), both originally native to western Eurasia and North Africa, have played an important role in Old World agroecosystems since their initial domestication by Neolithic farmers in the ancient Near East approximately 10,000 years ago. As cud-chewing herbivores, cows convert plant tissues inedible to humans into meat, hides, and tractive power. As omnivores, pigs compete more directly with humans for food, but they have long provided a valuable way to dispose of garbage. All cattle produce manure that can be used to maintain the fertility of agricultural fields. According to Jared Diamond’s Anna Karenina principle, “domesticable animals are all alike; every undomesticable animal is undomesticable in its own way.” Because of highly uneven patterns of megafaunal extinction before the advent of agriculture and herding, mainland regions of Africa and Eurasia retained a far greater variety of large animals with domesticable characteristics than did the Americas, Australia, and the islands of the world. With the marked exception of the Andean llama (Lama glama) and alpaca (Vicugna pacos), the Americas — the evolutionary birthplace of the horse (Equus caballus) — came to lack large mammals suitable for domestication. Symbolic of this process, Cuba’s first indigenous inhabitants are probably responsible for driving its only large mammal, the giant sloth (Megalocnus rodens), into extinction approximately 4,400 years ago.9 Nevertheless, Cuba’s indigenous inhabitants at contact, the Ciboney and Taíno peoples, continued to depend primarily on wild marine and woodland animals for protein, supplemented by household raising of guinea pigs (Cavia procellus, first domesticated in the Andes), a barkless dog bred for eating, and the aquaculture of mullet (Mugil curema), a small estuary fish.

The predominantly one-way exchange of people, animals, and diseases East to West across the Atlantic contributed to the single most important result of the Columbian exchange for Cuba: the virtual extinction of its indigenous population. Living in close proximity with animals has its downside, since it exposes humans to the transfer of macro-parasites and microbial diseases
across the species barrier. As a consequence, in order to survive to adulthood and reproductive age, European- and African-born individuals had to pass a gauntlet of diseases harbored by human-animal interaction — and, in the process, acquired robust immune systems. Two viral epidemic diseases, influenza (derived from pigs and chickens) and smallpox (derived from cows), had a particularly deadly impact on previously unexposed indigenous populations of the Greater Antilles between 1493 and 1525. Feral pigs and cows made matters far worse by eating away at the Amerindians’ basic source of subsistence (see below): cows consumed leaves and flowers, while pigs consumed fruits and the all-important roots. In the absence of human and natural predators, pigs and cows far outnumbered people in Cuba until the full emergence of an economy based on military garrisons and plantation slavery at the end of the eighteenth century. In this context, cattle provided an abundant source of food and trade articles (leather and candles) for Cuba’s sparse, multiethnic, early colonial population.

Before the widespread diffusion of refrigeration technologies in recent decades, all human societies depended on curing and cooking techniques to preserve the meat of butchered animals. One of my wife’s most vivid memories from the 1970s concerns watching her great uncle, a peasant farmer living in the “deep countryside,” dig a pit and fill it with salt and large slabs of beef in order to prepare tasajo. The prolonged boiling process involved in preparing an ajíaco not only provides a convenient way to make tasajo palatable again, but also provides a way to arrest the decomposition of whatever fresh (or not-so-fresh) meat happens to be at hand. Chunks of beef and pork are the favored ingredients for a Cuban ajíaco, but the American turkey (Meleagris gallopavo and M. ocellata, brought to Cuba after 1492), African guinea fowl (Numida meleagris, brought via the slave trade), and Southeast Asian chicken (Gallus gallus, introduced via both Europe and Africa) are also welcome additions to the stew pot.

Cheap tasajo made up a significant portion of the rations provided by plantation owners to their field slaves. This virtually assured that slow-boiled dishes like ajíaco remained standard fare in nineteenth-century Cuba. Through the tasajo supply, the “ecological footprint” of Cuba’s plantations extended, historically, not only to the dry scrublands of eastern Cuba, but as far as the Pampas grasslands of southern South America. Echoes of this old Atlantic economy still reverberate: tasajo in U.S. Hispanic groceries often carries the mark “Made in Uruguay.” Meanwhile, fresh beef has almost disappeared from ajíacos produced in today’s Cuba. Unlike with smaller livestock, Cuba’s command economy appropriated all cows and oxen as property of the state. The revolutionary government has carefully controlled the slaughter and consumption of beef (and given out long prison sentences to those breaking the rules). Even in cattle-raising regions, fresh beef has become a rare commodity — and the ajíaco much more centered on pork. But because ajíaco’s ingredients are so adaptable, it has survived even the most dramatic transformations of Cuban history.

**Sofrito (seasoned sauté)**

While the meat is cooking, prepare the sofrito and peel the vegetables. In a large skillet over medium heat, heat 2 tablespoons of lard (manteca) or ¼ cup of olive oil (aceite de oliva). Peel and crush 3 cloves of garlic (ajo); chop 1 large onion (cebolla) and 1 large, seeded green bell pepper (aji pimiento verde); add to the fat at medium-low heat and sauté, stirring occasionally for 6–8 minutes. Add one small can of tomato sauce (salsa de tomate) and ½ tsp. of ground cumin (comino) and sauté an additional 5 minutes, stirring occasionally. After the meats are cooked, add the sofrito to the stewpot with the vegetables. Note: to save effort, it is possible to omit the sofrito and simply add these ingredients directly to the stewpot.

In a wide variety of Cuban dishes, the sofrito adds taste (gusto) to ingredients that otherwise would be bland or insipid. Animal fats or vegetable oils convey the flavor of condiments added to a sofrito. Since the era immediately following the Spanish conquest, and thanks to the multiplication of Old World livestock, animal fats (especially lard) have been easiest to obtain in Cuba. Nevertheless, the earliest supply ships from Europe brought cargoes of oil pressed from the fruit of olive trees (Olea europaea), one of the most distinctive domesticates from the ancient woodlands of the eastern Mediterranean. Along with grape wine and wheat flour, the consumption of imported olive oil has long been a symbol of both Spanish descent and class status among Cubans. In recent years, Spanish-produced olive oil has become the cooking fat of choice among health- (and race-) conscious Cuban immigrants to the U.S., but the high cost of imported vegetable oils has always placed limits on their consumption in Cuba. Cooks pressed for time (or hard currency) often dispense with the sofrito altogether when preparing an ajíaco and add whatever condiments they have access to and can afford directly to the stewpot; in fact, Nitza Villapol explicitly recommended this tactic as a general cooking practice.

The earliest recorded account of a Cuban ajíaco got its name from an ancient South American domesticate: the chili pepper (Capsicum spp.). A disparaging 1598 description of Havana by Hernando de la Parra, a member of the Spanish governor’s household, noted that “The foods here are seasoned in a way that is so strange that they are repugnant at first, but Europeans eventually become so accustomed to them that they forget those of their own country and give them preference. The principal dish . . . that is served by these primitive inhabitants is a union of fresh and salted meats cut into small chunks, boiled with various roots, spiced by means of a small, caustic pepper (aji-ji-ji), and colored with a small seed (vija) that grows spontaneously even in household corrals.” Christopher Columbus interpreted capsicum peppers as evidence that he had reached the Spice Islands of the East Indies, his real goal. European gardeners soon began cultivating several American capsicum varieties, most notably, the mild bell pepper (a variety of *C. annuum*), and Hungarian cuisine eventually became famous for its use of bell peppers to make paprika (known by Cubans as pimentón). Many modern regional cuisines would be unrecognizable if not for their adoption of spicy capsicum varieties: for example, Thai curries. But unlike Creole (American-born) Mexicans, Peruvians, Louisianans, and early Cubans, today’s Cubans rarely cook with spicy chilies. Instead, they rely on the bell pepper or the small *aji cachucha* (a mild variety of *C. chinense*). New Cuban immigrants to the United States often make the mistake of purchasing another, look-alike variety of *C. chinense*, the habanero. It is all the more puzzling to Cubans experiencing the painful consequences of this error that these extremely hot peppers are named for Cuba’s capital, where they are now virtually unknown. (They probably diffused from Cuba to the Yucatán, their current home range, during the colonial period.)

Ground cumin seeds (*Cuminum cyminum*), original-
the Antilles.14

important role in the reintroduction of spicy
after the abolition of slavery played an
piquant, Amerindian to mild, Mediterranean
ajiaco
eh centuries, along with their cultural pref-
Spanish and Lebanese immigrants to Cuba
distinctive smell. The marked influx of
still use the ground bija seeds (Bixa orel-
ly native to the ancient Near East, are a com-
mon, modern ingredient of Cuban sofrito;
the combined scent of hot oil, garlic, and
cumin gives today’s Cuban kitchens their
distinctive smell. The marked influx of
Spanish and Lebanese immigrants to Cuba
during the late nineteenth and early twenti-
eeth centuries, along with their cultural pref-
ferences, likely played a role in the Cuban
ajiaco’s historical transformation from
piquant, Amerindian to mild, Mediterranean
flavorings. Interestingly, the parallel migra-
tion of South Asians to the British Caribbean
after the abolition of slavery played an
important role in the reintroduction of spicy
capsicum peppers into cuisines elsewhere in
the Antilles.14

Many peoples in the tropical Americas
still use the ground bija seeds (Bixa orel-
lanza) mentioned in de la Parra’s account —
better known in today’s Cuba as achioté —
to give foods a yellow-orange color.15
Achioté frequently finds its way into Cuban
sofritos prepared for rice dishes (and an
occasional ajiaco) though many Cuban-
Americans now substitute bright, synthetic
vegetable dyes or expensive Mediterranean
saffron (Crocus sativus). Condiments pro-
vide the clearest indication of change over
time in Cuban tastes and of the recent
development of “traditional” Cuban cuisine.

Viandas (stew vegetables)

While the meats are cooking, peel the
vegetables and cut into large chunks. After
the meats are cooked, add them to the stew-
pot at medium heat in the following order at
approximately 5-minute intervals: make
sure the vegetables are well-covered with
water: 1 lb. of yellow or white malanga
(yautia or cocoyam), 1 lb. of yuca (manioc
or cassava), 2 green plátanos (plantains or
cooking bananas), 1 lb. of boniato (white
sweet potato, NOT orange American sweet
potato), 1 lb. of malanga isleña (taro or
dasheen), 1 lb. of ñame (white tropical yam,
NOT orange American yam), 2 very ripe
plátanos (plantains, NOT sweet bananas), 2
cups of chunked calabaza (orange tropical
pumpkin; can substitute Hubbard or butter-
nut squash). After all vegetables are added,
reduce to low heat and simmer approximately
45 minutes, stirring occasionally. Then
add 2 ears of corn (maize) cut into two-inch
rounds; cook an additional 10-15 minutes.

Add salt to taste. Serve hot in bowls accom-
panied by lime wedges (limón criollo);
squeeze lime juice over achioja to taste at the
table. Makes approximately 12 large, meal-
impeded historical understanding of the role
of tropical societies — particularly Africans —
in domestication and long-distance crop
exchanges.

Yellow malanga (Xanthosoma sagitti-
folium) of various types and yuca (Manihot
esculenta) were originally domesticated in
South America, and they were widely dis-
tributed in lowland regions of the American
tropics by the fifteenth century. The Taíno
depended on an elaborate system of conuco
(garden) cultivation founded on the vegeta-
tive propagation of these and other crops.

This process also worked in the oppo-
site direction. Several Old World cultivars
accompanied African slaves across the
Middle Passage to the Americas. In fact,
several varieties of plantains and bananas
(Musa spp.) made this trip so soon after
1492 that European botanists long assumed
they were native to the American tropics.
Excavations in Kuk Swamp have provided
tantalizing evidence that New Guinea high-
landers independently domesticated bananas
and taro (Colocasia esculenta) by 6500
years ago. New Guineans or Melanesians
also probably domesticated a tropical yam
variety now commonly grown in Cuba
(Dioscorea alata), as well as sugar cane
(Saccharum officinarum) — the Americas’
first major export crop.19 These cultivars
diffused eastward to remote parts of the

Vegetable Stands in Mercado Tacón
Havana, Cuba. 1904
(Library of Congress Reproduction No. LC-D401-17664)
Pacific with Polynesian mariners and westward by a variety of routes. In the case of sugar cane, they reached the Caribbean as early as 1493. African-born slaves likely contributed vital know-how for their transplant into West Indian *conuco* systems, and their descendants — both enslaved and free — undoubtedly perpetuated their cultivation.

Slaves all over the Atlantic World sought the right to tend their own food crops. This was their most basic strategy to establish a life separate from their master’s will. Of course, this helped masters save money on imported and estate-grown rations, but “by appropriating their labour for themselves, slaves articulated their own interests and the means of achieving them.”

Two American domesticates, tropical pumpkin (*Cucurbita moschata*) and maize (*Zea mays*), take the least time to cook and are the last ingredients added to an *ajiaco* before serving. (Wait to squeeze the juice of fresh lime (*Citrus aurantiifolia*) — an early Spanish transplant to the West Indies, first domesticated in southeast Asia — over piping-hot bowls of *ajiaco* at the dinner table.) American squashes (*Cucurbita spp.*) rank among the world’s earliest domesticates, and they probably played a significant role in the transition from hunter-gatherer-fisher to agricultural livelihoods in the Western Hemisphere. The widespread dispersal of squashes, sweet potatoes, Mesoamerican domesticated maize, chilies, and other domesticates throughout the ancient Americas falsifies Jared Diamond’s hypothesis that the “North-South axis” of the Western Hemisphere acted as a geographical barrier to cultural exchange and advancement. But the two-way, East-West exchange of cultivars did contribute mightily to patterns of New World colonization. The Columbian exchange enabled a number of European, African, and Asian societies to export enormous numbers of people to the Western Hemisphere (and other world regions) without suffering depopulation — and, in turn, it enabled these immigrants to make decent lives for themselves as farmers or herders after they arrived.

**A Metaphor for Cuban Nationality**

The Greater Caribbean Basin and coastal regions of tropical South America are also “lands of Demographic Takeover.” In Cuba, Old World immigrants (from Europe, Africa, and more recently, Asia) intermingled with and eventually swamped the small indigenous population that survived the Spanish conquest. Like the temperate regions of the Americas, these tropical regions are dominated by an ethnic hodgepodge of Old World peoples, and there is no compelling biological reason to differentiate between the populations of these two domains unless one believes skin color and other inherited characteristics are important determiners of the course of modern history.

As the inheritors of a society once based on race slavery, Cubans have long been masters at making distinctions motivated by racial prejudice. Following the lead of nationalist ideologues elsewhere in Latin America, in 1940, white Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz proposed adopting the *ajiaco* as a culinary emblem for Cuba and a multicultural metaphor for racial and cultural mixing throughout the Americas. In his view, the process of cooking an *ajiaco* formed a new, unified entity out of multicultural diversity, and an *ajiaco* could be infinitely replenished with new ingredients to make additional meals without losing its basic identity. Ortiz explicitly hoped this home-grown concept would displac a term derived from the the United States, the melting pot (*crisol*), as a popular metaphor for the formation of national identity. Unlike the industrial melting pot of the Colossus of the North, which homogenized everything into a single alloy, the ingredients of an *ajiaco* never completely lost their distinct flavors and textures: “For us, *America, all of America, is an ajiaco.*”

Other Cubans never embraced Ortiz’ proposal. As a working-class food, *ajiaco* failed to convey the cultural sense of national greatness (and whiteness) preferred by most of Cuba’s pre-revolutionary ruling class, and this unassuming dish (almost never found on tourist menus) simply could not compete for foreigners’ attention with Cuban music, cocktails, and fried foods. At least in ideological terms, the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 abruptly converted much of Ortiz’ social vision into a material reality. Even though Ortiz’ *ajiaco* metaphor seems adaptable to these new circumstances, perhaps its subtle suggestion that “Cuba is fated to suffer . . . a never-ending state of ferment” and doomed to “lack a stable, enduring core of cultural ind[icators]” was too radical even for revolutionaries to accept.

ENDNOTES

1 Emphasis added; Alfred W. Crosby, The Columbian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); Crosby, Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Crosby’s seminal work, nevertheless, provided the basic inspiration for this essay. Judith A. Carney uses the transoceanic exchange of rice cultivars and agricultural practices to make a forceful case for crediting Africans (especially African women) as major agents of economic change in the early modern Atlantic World in Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001); while James J. Parsons examines the role African grasses have played as agents of ecological change in lowland tropical (but also montane and temperate) regions of the Americas in his classic article, “The Africanization of the New World Tropical Grasslands,” *Tubinger Geographische Studien* 35 (1970): 141-153.


6 A rigorous review of the often contentious literature on each ingredient would require far too much space. I will only cite specialized works for particularly controversial cases or as suggestions for further reading. Important general references

7 Jared Diamond, Guns, Germs, and Steel: *The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 1997), 157. Contrary to Diamond’s diffusionist assumptions, there is clear evidence that the cow was independently domesticated from the now-extirpated aurochs in the ancient Near East, South Asia, and northern Africa and widely diffused from these three separate centers of domestication. Indian cattle (zebu) and North American pure breeds have virtually supplanted Cuba’s original criollo cattle since their introduction in the mid-nineteenth century.


12 Perhaps in reaction, the “classic recipe” for ajiaco criollo in Rondellman and Schwartz, *Memories of a Cuban Kitchen*, 104-165, only calls for beef.


15 There is no historical connection between widespread indigenous use of ajiaco seeds in red body paint and the much later categorization of them as “redskins” in new world history narratives. *Rick Warner Wabash College*

To place a human face on the complexities of global interaction, world historians focus on specific cities as sites of economic and cultural interchange. Think of the importance of Malacca, Goa, and Aden in the Indian Ocean world. Due as much to trade as to military force, these “pressure points” or entrepôts become home to ethnically and socially-diverse peoples. These cities were fought over by imperial powers and were also the site of cross-cultural interaction between diverse individuals. In the early-modern world, these were colorfully cosmopolitan spaces. The multi-valent connections that often define world history can be seen in the urban areas, and they are as much “melting pots” as “salad bowls” in terms of cultural production. The rich stories from these communities can enliven world history narratives.

Panama City rarely makes the list of cosmopolitan stopovers in the first half of our modern world history surveys (1500-1800). Of course, awareness of the global importance of the later story of the Panama Canal is widespread, but one hears less of the earlier period. Yet the canal itself is not a bad place to begin thinking about the importance of Panama. That the United States was able to triumph where the French had failed, in completing the canal, is part of a familiar U.S. historical narrative. The Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty (signed 1903, ratified 1904) between Panama and the United States granted unusual rights to the northern neighbor, which surely reflects the imperialist spirit of the day.2 The construction of the canal is also a story of human misery, as thousands of working people who built the project succumbed to disease in the process. However, in the end, the canal must be seen as an engineering triumph, helped along as it was by an intensive effort to eliminate the scourges of yellow fever and malaria.

The world historical moment as the canal opened in 1914 is clear to every student: the world was now stitched together at another spot.

However, Panama was instrumental in linking the world long before the canal was built. Arguably, this process began in the Age of European Exploration and Exploitation. Columbus himself traveled to the coast of Panama during his fourth and final voyage, though the first European visitors had already sailed a few years earlier under Rodrigo de Bastidas. On that particular ship was the better known Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who returned to become the first European to traverse the mountains to the other side of the isthmus. He first saw the Pacific, facing south (since the isthmus runs east-west), on 26 September 1513.3 At the time, this must have been viewed as quite an achievement, since several attempts to settle the Caribbean shore were stifled by native tribes. The life of Balboa, on the other hand, was ended by the founder of Panama City, Pedro Arias de Avila (known as Pedrarias). For ordering the 1517 beheading of Balboa and for various violent intrigues against native Panamanians, Pedrarias is not remembered kindly.4

Shortly after its founding in 1519, Panama became an important hinge in the global economy. The royal road (CICAO REAL) built between the city and the northern coastal towns of Nombre de Dios and, later, Portobello, was instrumental in the movement of goods from South America to Europe. The most important of these was the Peruvian silver taken by Spaniards and their forced laborers from the “red mountain” at Potosí. The Panama route was a pleasant alternative to the rigors of sailing around Tierra del Fuego or the dangerous overland route to Buenos Aires.

Imperial competition in the centuries following the Columbian encounter played out in Europe as well as the Americas. The notion of all that silver passing through Panama was quite tempting to pirates, privateers, and the crowned heads of Europe. The

**CONSIDER PANAMA**

**Rick Warner**

Wabash College


16 Jared Diamond’s obsession with “large-seeded grass species” in ch. 8 of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* provides a notorious example of this. Except for a chapter on the “Potato Revolution” in Europe, Maguelonne Toussaint-Samat’s encyclopedic *History of Food*, trans. Anthea Bell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) devotes only nine pages to root crops, telling ly, in a chapter devoted to the “history of gathering” full of trop- 


